Mc Gregor E-5 (1922-1924)1948
NES Bella Coola NES

CHAPTER I

LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT

Location—Bella Coola Villages—Tribal Organization—Neighbouring Tribes

Location

"BELLA COOLA" is the common designation of those Indians who, until a few years ago, inhabited the valley of the Bella Coola River in central British Columbia. Boas has recorded[1] that the name is a mis-pronunciation of *Bilxula*,[2] a Kwakiutl word of doubtful origin which white pioneers assumed to be the appellation of the people in question. There is no term in their own language to include the groups treated in this monograph. Linguistically, the Bella Coola form an isolated island of Salish-speaking people, separated from others of the same stock by tribes of Athapascan and Kwakiutl lineage.[3] Culturally, they belong to the central section of the North Pacific coast area.[4]

The Bella Coola River rises among the mountainous uplands of central British Columbia. Its two main branches fall rapidly, about forty-five miles from the sea, into two deep gorges which unite, some five miles farther on, to form the valley of the Bella Coola. Down this the river rushes in serpentine curves (see Plate 5). Too shallow and too rapid for the use of large boats, even if such had been known to the Bella Coola, it serves to bear their dug-out canoes, each hewn from some mighty cedar. The valley is never wider than two or three miles and is hemmed in by lofty snow-capped moun-

[1] *The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians* (Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, 1898), vol. II, part 2, p. 25. Repeated reference will be made to this work, and when Boas is quoted without further description, the reference will be to this memoir.

[2] Pronounced *Belxwala* by a Kimsquit man endeavouring to quote a Kwakiutl.

[3] Boas, p. 26.

[4] Clark Wissler, *The American Indian* (2nd ed., New York, 1922), p. 227.

1:McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
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the neighbouring Carriers, but Chilkotin as well sometimes descended to the valley. On the coast, though the dense underbrush prevented travel along the shore, the long fiords, sheltered from the open Pacific, were ideal for the use of canoes.[10] Comparatively lengthy journeys were neither difficult nor uncommon. The *Tă'ĭo* people were usually on amicable terms with the inhabitants of Rivers Inlet, and the Kimsquit with the Kitlobe. The Bella Coola were accustomed to attend potlatches at Alert Bay and Fort Rupert,[11] Knight's Inlet, and Bute Inlet, receiving their hosts, in turn, at Bella Coola. On the other hand, there was little friendly intercourse with the northern tribes, of which the Kitkatla especially were dreaded by the residents of the central coast. Until recent years the Bella Coola had no direct knowledge of other Salish-speaking peoples, although some of the Chilkotin told them of a tribe living far to the south, in the interior, whom they encountered in some of their wanderings and used to term *Nuxălkmq*, recognizing the similarity between their language and that of the Bella Coola. A few years ago several Bella Coola attended a boarding-school and were amazed to find that many of their words were understood by fellow-students from Chilliwack.

To sum up: The Bella Coola were in close contact with the neighbouring coastal tribes, with the members of which they felt themselves to have cultural affinities. They recognize that they have received many ceremonial rites from their neighbours, and must have adopted other elements of culture which they now consider indigenous. It is probable that certain Bella Coola customs must likewise have been transmitted to other tribes, but such lie without the scope of this monograph. The outlying villages were in close contact with foreign neighbours, and tended to assimilate elements of their culture, but upon the whole, the Bella Coola present a tribal unity with distinctive local customs, falling within the general pattern of coastal culture.

[10] For types of canoes, see Appendix A.
[11] The principal Kwakiutl villages.

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The following is an account of a feud which took place about 1870: 556* 558 628

The people of *Ismel* had gone to a potlatch at *Tăl'ēo* with a plentiful supply of goods, expecting to be insulted in revenge for a slight cast upon their host when visiting *Ismel*. They were allotted places close to the fire, upon which the donor cast a large quantity of olachen grease until the intense heat almost roasted his guests. Not one of them moved; to have done so would have meant an admission that they were being made uncomfortable by their host's demonstration of wealth by this waste of valuable food. Presently, *Ismēlaiela*, the leading chief of the visitors, stood up and called for "water" to douse the flames, meaning goods of equal or greater value, to indicate that he was as wealthy as his host and as little afraid of destroying valuables. His companions threw on the fire boxes filled with skins, but *Ismēlaiela* desired still further to demonstrate his prowess. Hastily, he asked some of the other Bella Coola present to lend him a sea canoe (of the large type called *Haidat*), promising to repay with two of the same kind. The Bella Coola agreed and the craft was carried in, the bearers showing their disregard for the host by breaking his door as they did so. The canoe was thrown on the fire and the flames mounted. *Ismēlaiela* called upon his *Tăl'ēo* rival to douse that fire. The latter was afraid to do so, being aware that he had barely enough goods to pay his debts at the coming distribution. Accordingly, he tacitly acknowledged the superiority of *Ismēlaiela*, who thus rose in public esteem. [501]

It is very difficult to discover just how often such destruction of goods took place. The Bella Coola realize that the prevalence of this practice among the Kwakiutl led to the potlatch being forbidden by law, and are reticent on the subject. Reliable informants agree that it was a fairly common custom in the early days, although it never went to the extremes prevailing at Fort Rupert and Alert Bay, where, too, was common the breaking of coppers in anger, an act unknown in Bella Coola. In other respects, also, the potlatch among the Bella Coola appears to be less important and less complicated in ritual than among the Kwakiutl, so it is highly probable that the above statement is correct. 556* 558 171

Another method of shaming a guest is to serve him, or any member of his party, so clumsily or gracelessly with food that it is spattered over him. In some cases this happens acci- 558 556*

2: McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
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intense pain caused him to shriek in agony. Judging by the sound that the guards had been overcome and were being killed, the raiders were thrown into confusion. With one accord they abandoned the attack and fled to their canoes; those who first reached them pushed off at once, abandoning their less fortunate comrades to their fate.

One of *Trdzoe*'s wives was a Bella Bella who feared that a dearly loved relative, a certain *Nacmā'a*, might be among the assailants. In the confusion that followed the rout she called out in her native speech:

"*Nacmā'a*, are you there?"

The Bella Coola had actually been reinforced by a number of Bella Bella volunteers including *Nacmā'a*, but he had made good his escape. Another Bella Bella, less fortunate, realized that this was a chance for help and called back, imitating the voice of the man addressed. The woman was deceived and told him to drag one of the Kitkatla canoes into the water and that she would bring paddles as soon as she could do so unobserved. About forty of the attackers took possession of a large canoe, but their courage failed as they waited for the woman with paddles and they shoved off, propelling the craft with their hands. Aided by an off-shore wind, they were able to steal away from the scene and had almost reached a tiny islet when they met another canoe coming to *Trdzoe*'s assistance. A fight ensued, the refugees were driven ashore to the island and their canoe carried off. Even in their perilous position the party continued to wrangle. Some scoured the woods for yellow cedar from the bark of which the Carriers used to make canoes, an art well known, although not generally practised by the coastal tribes. Fire had swept over the island so that only two trees were found; the discoverers hastily peeled bark from these, fashioned it into rude canoes, and pushed off with their friends, leaving seven men marooned. The two craft ultimately reached Bella Coola after various adventures.

B T [171] [50]

Among the seven abandoned were two uncles of the father of the man from whom this account was obtained, as well as the grandfather of a middle-aged Kimsquit man with whom the tale was also discussed. The two brothers were warriors, men whose bravery had been validated. One said to the other:

"You are always boasting of your valour, now is your opportunity to display it. Swim across and steal a canoe from the village we attacked."

Thus urged, the man agreed to make the attempt, first requesting the others not to kill his brother, the originator of the scheme, in case of his non-return, though this was the usual penalty for proposing a plan which led to the death of another. But the Bella Bella who had imitated *Nacmā'a*'s voice insisted on risking his life. He stripped, tied a knife to his hand, took a board for support, and essayed the task. He had no

2: McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
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PLATE 21

Photograph by the author

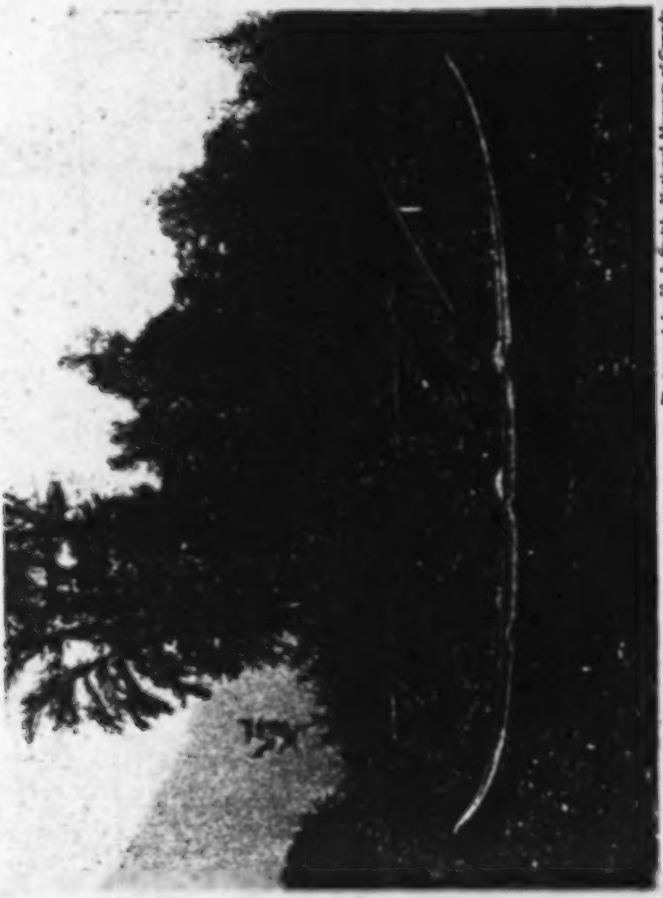
River canoe

[p 532 (A)]

2: McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
NE6 Bellacoola NE6

137
501

PLATE 22



Photograph by W. J. Smith, National Museum of Canada

Ocean canoe

[φ532 (B)]

2: McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
NE6 Bellacoola NE6

tacles; metal coal-oil cans are found convenient for this purpose and have almost replaced watertight boxes. After repeated stirrings and skimmings, all that remains is a mass of putrid flesh, bearing no resemblance whatever to the fish from which it came. The Kitlobe are said to compress this into cakes for eating, but the Bella Coola throw it away. Some cooks bail out the dregs by hand, but many of the box-kettles have a bung-hole at the bottom which, when opened, allows the semi-liquid remains to flow out into a rough trough leading to the river. As soon as one batch of olachen has thus been disposed of, another is boiled and refined in the same way. The grease keeps indefinitely and is a useful article of barter with the Carriers as well as a staple of Bella Coola diet. Although the preparation removes much of its offensive odour, olachen grease has an unpleasant taste to the white man.

During the boiling, all other activities are suspended and the people spend practically all their time on the river bank. If the fish are allowed to rot too long, much of the grease is lost, so men, women, and children are pressed into service to make the most of the short period. The men rise at dawn to start the fires on the bank, the women and children follow with food, and for several days the whole village camps, as if on a picnic, amid an indescribably foul smell that almost sickens anyone passing within hundreds of yards. There are tasks for everyone; the fish must be carried from the pits to the furnaces, wood must be brought, the fires stoked, the kettles stirred, the grease carried away, the fireplaces repaired, food cooked, and a hundred other chores. It is a scene of great activity, carried on with good humour and merriment, for the Bella Coola realize that they are storing up luxuries for the following winter. Even the dogs seem to share the general excitement, and do not disdain to eat the dregs from the kettles, which, when emptied into the river, attract numerous trout and gulls, to the joy of small boys with hunting desires.

BELLA COOLA CANOES

Although travel and transport by water is still as vital to the Bella Coola as it was to their fathers, the motor-boat is fast replacing the canoe, and the science of manufacturing their own craft is being lost. In former times several types were constructed, but only one of these is still employed —the spoon canoe, *sā-tla*, used on rivers (see Plate 21). These vary from twenty to thirty feet or more in length, and are about four feet wide; they are without keels, and there is no difference between the bow and stern. Although one man can handle such a craft in smooth water, at least two are required for a journey of any length, and four is the usual crew. The captain, who is either the best waterman or the one most familiar with the route, stands in the stern, the second in command in

2:McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948
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the bow. The crew take their places at equal intervals between, each ready to work on the opposite side from the man in front. Each is provided with a ten-foot pole and also a paddle for use in spots where the river is too deep for poling. The rivers of central British Columbia are shallow, but swift, and their navigation requires considerable skill. Going upstream, the captain constantly seeks the smoothest water, where he knows the current will be least strong, and uses his pole to keep the craft headed in the right direction. Should it be caught in a violent eddy, he exerts his full strength, and it is his voice that rallies the crew for a final exertion to shove the canoe through. Coming downstream is more dangerous though less wearying. The water is so cold and the current so swift that a capsizing usually causes the drowning of one or more of the occupants, and the captain must never relax. Spoon canoes are very stable, and cannot be upset by a faulty distribution of weight. This is essential in view of the rapids, but they are heavy and cumbersome, unsuited to carrying large loads. 502 [501]

When a carpenter wishes to make a canoe, he fells a cedar of suitable size and trims off bark and branches to leave the central stem available. Slowly and laboriously he chips with his adze until he has hollowed out the trunk to the proper shape, and at the same time has smoothed away the outer surface. Sometimes a small fire is built on the trunk so that it will char the wood beneath and make it easier to remove, but the carpenter must be careful that the flames do not spread too far. Finally, as his work reaches completion, he becomes even more painstaking than before. The sides and bottom are whittled to a thickness of no more than three inches, and at this stage a faulty stroke may pierce the shell and ruin the toil of weeks. When completed, it is necessary to widen and harden the canoe. A fire is built beside it and stones thrown into the flames to heat; then lifted out and dropped into the water with which the craft has been partly filled. Steam rises, and the carpenter confines it by covering the canoe with matting, at the same time endeavouring to pull and force the sides apart. Sometimes he can do so by mere muscular effort, more often it is necessary to lay transverse thwarts within and, by pounding them downwards, extend the sides. No great extension is possible, nor is it required, but the steaming process is considered to harden the wood as well as widen the canoe. 396 [412]

Until five or ten years ago, the Bella Coola made another type of canoe, *dawa*, for use on the ocean. A few examples of this style are still in existence (see Plate 22). Though approximately the same length as river canoes, they are proportionately much deeper and narrower, and an extension downwards near the stern serves in place of a keel. These craft are sufficiently sea-worthy to weather any ordinary storm. Several 501

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501 of the older people remember seeing in their youth another type, *łakan*, with a high raised prow; this may have been identical with the *mdłe* which others describe as having an elevated bow and a low stern. An entirely different craft was the *tsmḵmd'i*, named from one of the geese, [825] probably the white-fronted goose. A strip of maple fastened along each side caught the water in moving, with a sound like that of the peculiar rustling flight of the bird. The bow was often carved in the form of a [532] bird's head and the stern in that of a tail to further the resemblance. No living Bella Coola claims to have seen one of these canoes, though some had heard of them from their grandparents. The large, open type of canoe made by the Haida was known to the Bella Coola, but not constructed by them. Sails were used on all ocean-going canoes; they were usually of matting, though skins sewn together were occasionally employed.

501 Canoes are occasionally lashed together. In several *ḵusiut* dances a 535 wide platform for dancing is required, and the need is met by lashing planks crosswise over two canoes, near the bow and stern, thus fastening them together. Planking is laid on the two supports and a platform so constructed. Careful inquiries showed that this fastening was merely a temporary arrangement; the boards were not bound in any particular manner, nor was there any fixed distance between the craft. Sometimes 501 the same expedient was used for transport when the load was too heavy [171] for two canoes separately, a device which is said to have been used more commonly by the tribes of the outer coast than the Bella Coola. Canoes lashed together are termed *ts'awmdy*.

Rafts, *xaxtkwa'a*, consisting of rough logs fastened together with cross-pieces, were commonly used on the lakes of the interior, and occasionally for river work when canoes were unavailable and there was no time to make them. Another expedient in similar emergencies was to [177] make bark canoes, such as are still constructed by the Carriers. The Bella Coola regard the construction of these as definite copying, and do not profess to have as much skill as their teachers whose canoes, it is said, can be folded for portaging. There is a tradition that, many generations ago, a few clever Bella Coola knew how to make skin canoes.

THE PREPARATION OF CEDAR-BARK

314 Early spring is the time to *xaxadmdi*, that is, to gather the inner bark [221] of the cedar. Men occasionally assist in the task, though this is really [462] woman's work. The worker selects a small cedar, choosing one about six inches in diameter, with smooth trunk and relatively free from knots. With a knife she makes a horizontal incision in the bark, two or three feet [412] from the ground, sometimes girdling the sapling. Then she inserts her

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Simsyut: One of the first men to settle in the Dean River valley in the beginning of time.

Simsnimit: 1—"Right Hand": Name of a *Sisaok* repository derived from a supernatural creature.
2—*Kwixot* name of a Bella Coola woman.

sin'nuta: Intangible *kwixot* prerogative of imitating cuitin. [424]

sinhalyinuta: Song sung by a *kwixotem* dancer on recovery from apparent death. [861]

sinhim: Regular beatings given to a male child.

Sinlayam, "Time for Gathering Fern Root": Fourth moon after the summer solstice. [805]

Sinlukwatsa: Rain after storm, anthropomorphized. This presumably refers to rain that comes after violent thunder. [821]

Sinlulmaic di Sint, "The Gathering of the Supernatural Beings": Fifth moon after the summer solstice. [805]

sinmaldjut: Term of opprobrium applied to one who will not allow his children to perform ceremonial dances. [626]

sinmut: Outright bestowal of a prerogative at marriage. [425]

sinsuta: Departure to a new locality.

sint, *sintsitsa*, *sintut*: Father's brother or mother's brother. [601]

sintut: Paddle.

sintuta: Dangerous power such as is present at various petrified places. [501]

Sintsuta: One of the names of the supreme god. [778]

Sintlaq': Ancestral name of a Bella Coola woman.

sint, *sintsitsa*, *sintut*: 1—Any supernatural being, the significance being, "Learned."
2—Supernatural power of any kind.
3—Synonym for *qumaits*, the large *sisaok* whistle. [825]
4—Killer whale.
5—Song.
6—*Kwixot* name of one of the first men to settle at Kimsquit in the beginning of time.

Sintsut: Part of a peculiar repository.

Sintumtsila: Celebrated Bella Coola warrior. [533]

sintsutsa: Wordless chorus.

Sinuk'ut, "Where Canoes Are Left": Village on the upper Kimsquit River.

Sinuk: Celebrated *Dzoldzoxa* chief living in the last century.

sinulkum: 1—Expedition without definite objective, made by a despondent person. [828]
2—Individual making such a journey. [484]

Sipmaw'a: 1—Daughter of the supreme god.
2—*Kwixot* name of a Bella Coola woman.

sisaka tsuxuta: Place where healing power is petrified.

Sisalupaman: Synonym for *Mulukhila*, the supernatural being connected with *sisaok* rites.

sisaokumap: *Kwixot* dance or object used in the land above which serves as pattern or model, *tsutsaoka*, for the user's prestige on earth.

sisaokpintumk: Actual goods used for the "Opening," the first public announcement of a forthcoming marriage. [584]

sisaok: Unmarried mother. [848]

sisaoka: To perform the services of a herald to a master, especially the proper direction of all chiefly rites. The word *sisaoka* may be connected with this.